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Creators	Ó hUiginn, Ruairí
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CAPTAIN SOMHAIRLE AND HIS BOOKS REVISITED

Ruairí Ó hUiginn

BY ANY STANDARD the compilation known as the Book of the O'Connor Don is a remarkable document. Its size, scope and ambition, the meticulous arrangement of its contents, its cultural context and place of compilation, combine to set it apart from other Irish *duanaireadha*.¹ Accordingly there are many questions that arise with regard to its background, the circumstances of its compilation, and the intent of the compiler. While basic queries relating to *tempus*, *locus* and *personae* are readily answered, ascertaining the *causa scribendi* presents a more challenging obstacle.

Scribal colophons inform us that the work was compiled in 1631 in Ostend, the work being executed mainly by a scribe who calls himself Aodh and who worked on behalf of Captain Somhairle Mac Domhnaill.² Apart from this main scribe, Hyde has pointed to the presence of at least two other hands, one of which penned the material found in ff. 97–107, and another which added some lines at ff. 98 and 99 as well as a number of authorial ascriptions for which he sometimes erases the ascription previously given by the scribe Aodh.³ Subsequent examination of the manuscript suggests that there may be more than these two hands involved.⁴ In addition, some marginal annotations of a historical nature were added in the course of the eighteenth century by Charles O'Connor, who signed his name on f. 233r.

Mac Domhnaill, we know, was a member of the émigré military community in Spanish Flanders that had grown in the aftermath of the Nine Years War and events that followed.⁵ At the time BOCD was compiled, he was a captain of a company of musketeers in the Irish Regiment. Of the main scribe, Aodh, on the other hand, we know very little. We have, however, another extensive example of

¹For a description of the manuscript see Hyde 'Book of the O'Connor Don'. I am grateful to Pádraig Ó Macháin for helpful comment on this paper, and to Benjamin Hazard for answering queries of mine.

²See the colophons at f. 67r: 'a nÓisdin do sgríobhus [do caiptin Samuirle] In .14. Iuniuari 1631'; f. 150r: 'Do sgríobhus do reir mur fuarus [do Chaipin Samuirle misi Aódh]'. Although a later hand attempted to erase references to Captain Somhairle and to Aodh, these entries are still legible.

³Hyde, 'Book of the O'Connor Don', 79.

⁴On this point see Pádraig Ó Macháin's contribution to this volume.

⁵On the development of this community see Henry, *Irish military community*.

his work in a manuscript of the Franciscan collection now housed in University College Dublin. Franciscan MS A 20 is a compendium of Fenian literature, containing a copy of *Agallamh na Seanórach*, a fragment of another Fenian tale, and the extensive collection of Fenian ballads known as *Duanaire Finn*.⁶ In this manuscript, in which he was responsible for ff. 99–100 and 110–129 of *Agallamh na Seanórach* and for *Duanaire Finn* in its entirety, the scribe names himself as Aodh Ó Dochartaigh. Here, as is the case with the Book of the O’Conor Don, he states that he was engaged in the work for Caiphtín Somhairle.⁷ A second scribe, Niall Gruamdha Ó Cathán, who wrote the greater part of *Agallamh na Seanórach*, also states that he was writing for Somhairle Mac Domhnaill and that he was engaged in this work both in Ostend and in Louvain.⁸

Ó Cathán appears to have been a Franciscan.⁹ On f. 64v of this manuscript he notes the feast-day of St Francis, his patron,¹⁰ and on top of most pages in his hand he has inscribed the Christograph *IHS*. In contrast, this symbol is absent from pages in the hands of Aodh Ó Dochartaigh or of other unidentified scribes who contributed to this manuscript. This makes it unlikely that Ó Dochartaigh was a Franciscan, as surmised by MacNeill,¹¹ and may lend support to Jennings’s identification of this scribe with a certain Don Hugo Doharty, a soldier of the company of Captain Mauricio Geraldin, to whom a monthly grant of four crowns was made in June 1626.¹² The co-operation of the two main scribes, one with strong Franciscan associations the other most

⁶For a description of this manuscript see *FLK Cat.*, 39–43.

⁷‘Ag sin duit a Chaiphtín Samhairle 7 ní feaduium niosa mhó do sgriobhadh an uairsi, ó bhuaidhreach in chreatha’ (f. 39v); ‘Ag sin duit a Chaiphtín Samhairle. et da ffaghuiunni ni badh mo ina sin do dhúanaire Finn ré na sgriobhadh do dheanainn dháobhsi e. Misi Aódh Ó Docartaigh do sgriobh a nOisín in .12. Februari 1627’ (f. 74r); ‘misi Áodh do sgriobh’ (f. 90r).

⁸‘tionnscantur an leabharsa do sgriobhadh re Niall Gruamdha do thSomhairle Mac Domhnaill a noisín 7 augus 1626’ (f. 1r); ‘anoistín in deicheamh la .xx. septemper .1626. crich in leabhair conuici seo 7 go ndeana Día trocairi ar in bfer ro sgriobh .i. Niall Gruamda O Cathan 7 air fhir in libuir mur in ceadna .i. Somhairle Mac Domhnaill 7rl-’ (f. 56r); ‘.2. desemper .1626. a Lobbán don leabursa da. sgriobhadh re Niall O Cathan ilim trocuire’ (f. 97r).

⁹The possibility that he was a lay Third-Order Franciscan is raised by Benjamin Hazard in his contribution to this volume. If this is the case, he may also have been a soldier, but we lack any definite proof on this point.

¹⁰‘Lá .S. Proindsíos mo patrún beannaigh.’

¹¹*Duan. Finn* I, p. xx.

¹²See *Duan. Finn* III, 217. That the grant was made for past services may suggest that Doharty was retired from Geraldin’s company at that time.

likely a soldier, coupled with the fact that the manuscript was written in two locations, points again to the close ties that existed between the Irish Franciscan community in Louvain and the Irish military garrison in Ostend.

In trying to establish the context in which the Book of the O'Connor Don came into being, a central question we should address is what the relationship between Aodh Ó Dochartaigh and Somhairle Mac Domhnaill actually was? It has been customary to refer to it as one between scribe and patron, and while this may be factually true, we may ask what kind of patronage a landless soldier would have been able to extend to a scholar or scribe. This question looms even larger when addressed to the earlier Franciscan manuscript, as it is not immediately evident why a cleric based in Louvain would have penned the greater part of a long Fenian tale for a soldier who was stationed at a remove of some 80 miles from him.

A second and perhaps more pertinent question is why Somhairle commissioned Aodh Ó Dochartaigh and Niall Ó Cathán to compile such extensive works. While it can be argued that the earlier volume of heroic Fenian tales and ballads contained material that would have appealed to the soldier and man of action Mac Domhnaill was,¹³ it seems rather strange that he would then commission a massive volume of religious and court poetry containing not one single poem in honour of himself or of his family's name.¹⁴ To address these questions we must look at the man, his historical and social context, and the political and social networks in which he was involved.

The circumstances that brought Somhairle Mac Domhnaill to the Low Countries have been dealt with in detail elsewhere,¹⁵ but for present purposes it will be useful to revisit some of the main events in his life and focus on some important facets of the man and his time.

A scion of the Antrim Clann Domhnaill, Somhairle was born about 1592.¹⁶ He was a son of Sir Séamas, Séamas na Banna (†1601), and

¹³On this point see Gillespie, *Conspiracy*, 34–5, and Ó hUiginn, 'Duanairé Finn: patron and text', 98–9.

¹⁴On this point see Mc Donnell, *Wild Geese of the Antrim MacDonnells*, 31, and Ó hUiginn, 'Duanairé Finn: patron and text', 104–106.

¹⁵For accounts of Somhairle Mac Domhnaill's life see Walsh, 'Captain Sorley MacDonnell and his books', and 'The books of Captain Sorley MacDonnell'; Jennings, 'Some documents'; Mc Donnell, *Wild Geese of the Antrim MacDonnells*, 16–32; idem, 'Responses of the MacDonnell clan'; Ó hUiginn, 'Duanairé Finn' (1995); idem, 'Duanairé Finn: patron and text'; idem, 'Somhairle Mac Domhnaill agus Duanairé Finn'.

¹⁶His first name appears in a variety of anglicised forms: Sorley, Surly, Shorly, Sorle, Sobre and Samberloy, the last form of which appears to be an attempt to render a strongly

a grandson of the famous Somhairle Buidhe (†1589). We know that Somhairle had been fostered to a man named McMoylan (Mac Maoláin) in Six Mile Water, an arrangement that would be in keeping with his status as the son of a nobleman.¹⁷

His father, Sir Séamas, had been head of the name, but on his death in 1601 his succession was not conducted according to the system of primogeniture which would have seen his eldest son Alasdair Carrach, then most likely a minor, take his place. Instead it passed to Sir Séamas's brother Ragnall (Ragnall Árannach).¹⁸ A consummate politician, Sir Ragnall Mac Domhnaill, later first Earl of Antrim, succeeded in keeping his religion and in holding on to most of his land, through a period that saw the Tudor and Stuart conquest of Ireland and the Plantation of Ulster.

Sir Ragnall's efforts to come to terms with the new dispensation did not meet with the approval of all his kinsmen, and even less so when he surrendered some of the Clann Domhnaill land for the purposes of plantation, encouraging Lowland settlers to become tenants of his in the baronies of Dunluce and Glenarm.¹⁹ This added to the grievance felt by the family of his brother, Sir Séamas, and in early 1615 his nephews Alasdair and Somhairle, together with some other disaffected members of the Antrim Clann Domhnaill, entered into conspiracy with the intention of staging an uprising in Ulster. While the plotters may have had the immediate object of recovering land given over for the purposes of plantation, it is likely that they had the wider goal of rekindling the confessional war against England with Spanish and Scottish involvement.²⁰ The plot, however, was discovered before it developed any further, and some of the main conspirators, including Alasdair Mac Domhnaill, were arrested. Although several of the plotters were later executed, Alasdair

nasalised vowel in the first syllable, i.e. /sāvər' L'ə/. While he is usually referred to as McDonald/McDonnell (also Maconell, representing Mac Dhomhaill), patronymics based on the name of his father (McJames) or on that of his grandfather (McSorley) are also sometimes used.

¹⁷Reference to a meeting between Somhairle and his foster-father on the island of Sanday in 1616 is found in a deposition made by a certain John O'Conlon on 1 August 1616; see Russell, *Calendar of State papers ... Ireland* V, 133. With regard to fosterage see Nicholls, *Gaelic and gaelicised Ireland*, 90–91.

¹⁸Ó Ceallaigh, *Gleanings*, 103–107.

¹⁹The 9 townlands, comprising 2,000 or so acres, he cleared of native tenants and surrendered for plantation included some of the best land held by the Clann Domhnaill; see Hill, *Plantation in Ulster*, 395–7.

²⁰On the Ulster plot and its aftermath see Gillespie, *Conspiracy*, and Healy, *Planter's progress*.

was acquitted even though the evidence against him was more substantial than that used against his co-conspirators.²¹ His acquittal was most probably due to the influence his uncle was able to exercise on his behalf, and Alasdair, like Sir Ragnall, was later to come to terms with the new dispensation in Ulster. He died in 1634 as Sir Alexander McDonnell of Moye. His brother Somhairle, on the other hand, fled to Rathlin Island, where in the company of his Scottish kinsman and co-conspirator, Colla Ciotach mac Giolla Easpaig, he engaged for a while in piracy of ships running in and out of Lough Foyle, and gained a formidable reputation in so doing.²²

The involvement of the Scottish Clann Domhnaill in the Ulster plot was not at all surprising. The Clann Domhnaill of Antrim were, after all, part of the southern branch of the family, the Clann Eóin Mhóir, and were closely related to the ruling house of Dunnyveg in Islay, the head of which, Sir Aonghas (†1614), was a first cousin of Sir Ragnall. Sir Ragnall himself had been fostered in the Scottish island of Arran, from which he acquired the sobriquet Ragnall Árannach, and held much land in Islay.²³

The fortunes of the Clann Domhnaill, however, had been in decline and since the demise of the Lordship of the Isles at the end of the fifteenth century they had steadily been losing ground to the loyalist Campbell house of Argyll. By the beginning of the seventeenth century they were in dire straits indeed, and trying by all means to retain their lands, although their cause was not helped by the internecine strife that frequently broke out among their members. In 1614 Sir Aonghas of Islay died, and as his eldest son and heir, Sir Séamas, was in Edinburgh Gaol, a period of instability ensued. This brought other members of Sir Aonghas's family into contention with each other and with the Crown, a situation that almost certainly was encouraged by the Campbells.

The imprisoned Sir Séamas's efforts to bring about a peaceful resolution to the strife through making certain offers to the Scottish Privy Council were met by silence, and Campbell of Calder was given a commission to restore Islay to peace, much to the despair of Sir Séamas who wished for reconciliation with the Crown and restoration of the family lands.²⁴

²¹On this see Healy, *Planter's progress*, 62–4.

²²The career of Colla Ciotach and his involvement in Ulster at this time is discussed in Black, 'Colla Ciotach'.

²³See Gregory, *History of the Western Highlands*, 347.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 358.

In May 1615 members of the Clann Domhnaill of Keppoch, the Clanranald, arranged the escape of Sir Séamas from Edinburgh Gaol.²⁵ He then made for the Western Isles, and in a short period of time had gathered supporters to his banner and was engaged in full-scale rebellion.²⁶ On learning of this, Somhairle Mac Domhnaill and Colla Ciotach departed from Rathlin and sailed the 100 miles or so to the Island of Eigg, south of Skye, where they met Sir Séamas and joined forces with him. Gathering further support, the rebels moved south to Islay.²⁷ While the rebellion enjoyed success initially, by October of that year the Crown forces under the Earl of Argyll had gained the upper hand. Sir Séamas fled to Ireland and from there to Flanders, where his arrival in early 1616 was reported to Sir William Trumbull, English Ambassador to Flanders.²⁸

Somhairle also returned to Ireland where a temporary truce was obtained for him through the offices of his uncle, Sir Ragnall, none to the pleasure of the Lord Deputy Chichester who wished to see him punished. Pre-empting any possible moves against him when his period of sanctuary would run out, Somhairle and a band of his followers descended on the port of Olderfleet in February 1616, seized a ship belonging to the planter Sir Thomas Phillips, and thence made for Kintyre where they stormed a fortress of the Earl of Argyll and seized a considerable amount of weaponry. They then returned to Rathlin where they based themselves and, with the support of the islanders, resumed preying on the maritime traffic in and out of Lough Foyle.

Due to the volatile state of Ulster at the time, the fear of a new Spanish invasion, and Somhairle Mac Domhnaill's established credentials as a conspirator and rebel, both in Ireland and in Scotland, he was pursued from Rathlin Island by two ships sent by Sir Thomas Phillips. Making his way through the Inner and Outer Hebrides, he was in Harris by May

²⁵An event that is also commemorated in poetry, see MacKenzie, *Orain Iain Luim*, 6, 230–31.

²⁶It may have been Mac Domhnaill's intention to stage uprisings simultaneously in Ulster and in Scotland. The discovery of the plot of 1615, however, ended any hope of a rebellion in Ulster.

²⁷The meeting on Eigg between Sir Séamas, Colla Ciotach and Somhairle is described in MacPhail, *Highland papers* III, 254.

²⁸An account of his journey to Flanders is contained in a letter he sent to Flaithrí Ó Maoil Chonaire dated 4 February 1616; see Kerney Walsh, 'Destruction by peace', 375–6. It is interesting to note that the report to Sir William Trumbull of Sir Séamas's arrival in the Low Countries also mentions that the arrivals did not include 'Sorley McDonnell or any of that company' (Purnell et al., *Downshire manuscripts* VI, 40). Even at that early stage in his career, Somhairle Mac Domhnaill's reputation had preceded him to Flanders.

of that year and, sailing on around the north coast of Scotland, he made his way down the east of Britain, arriving in Dunkirk in June 1616.

On making land, he moored his ship but was recognized by a sailor in the port who reported his presence, whereupon the Governor had him arrested. He then became the subject of a diplomatic dispute; the English Ambassador William Trumbull did all in his power to have him surrendered so that he might be punished as a pirate. The Archduke, however, was prevailed upon to have him released and accommodated in a company of the Irish Regiment in Flanders, and by September of that year he was so accommodated.

Thereafter we have but fleeting references to him, but such references as we have suggest that he was still engaged in conspiracy. One of the most important of these references is from October of the following year, 1617, when 'Don Sorle Macdonel' described as a 'cabellero irlandes' was found at the Court in Madrid in the company of three Scottish nobles.²⁹ His purpose there was to argue that he be awarded an enhanced pension, as other Irishmen of lesser rank than he were in receipt of more money from the King. One of the Scotsmen in his company was a certain Don Donaldo Macdonel, described as a son of the 'McDonnell who is in Rome'. There is some evidence that Sir Séamas Mac Domhnaill journeyed to Rome at this time,³⁰ and if the reference is to him, then the Don Donaldo Macdonel is probably his son, Domhnall Gorm, who travelled with him to the Continent following the failure of his rebellion in Scotland. Another of the company, 'Don Alexandro Macdonel, señor de Braylocquhaber en Escocia' is almost certainly Alasdair Mac Domhnaill of Keppoch, the person who organized Sir Séamas Mac Domhnaill's escape from Edinburgh Gaol.³¹ The fourth member of the company, referred to as 'Don Columba McCloy', may have been Malcolm McLeod of Lewis, another of the rebels who followed Sir Séamas and was closely associated with him during his exile.

Of particular interest is the fact that the petitioners had as their interpreter Colonel William Semple, a long-standing, well-connected and leading Scottish soldier in the Spanish army and prominent advocate for the Catholic cause.³² A legal document concerned with Somhairle Mac Domhnaill's pension, and which is dated 16 November 1617, had as its

²⁹ Archivo General de Simancas, File number 2779. I am grateful to Ciarán O'Sceá for this reference.

³⁰ See Worthington, *Scots in Habsburg service*, 58.

³¹ Gregory, *History of the Western Highlands*, 367–8.

³² See Worthington, 'Alternative diplomacy?', 56–8.

witness a certain Hugo de la Guardia, almost certainly Fr Hugh Ward or Aodh Buidhe Mac an Bhaird who had been ordained the previous year and who was later to play such a pivotal role in the Louvain project.³³

In 1618 Ambassador Trumbull reported that ‘Sir James McDonnell had some secrett enterprize upon Scotland or Ireland and to that end have sente Sorley Mac James, the pyrate, and some others of his followers in the habitt of pilgrims towards the Viceroy of Naples’.³⁴ We do not know exactly what the purpose of this journey was or what came of it but it is of interest to note that at that time there was a contingent of 104 Scottish Infantrymen stationed in Naples under the command of a Don Daniel Macdonnel, who may possibly be identical with the Donaldo Macdonel with whom Somhairle had been in Madrid the previous year.³⁵

In 1620 Somhairle was part of Archduke Ferdinand’s army that fought in the Battle of White Mountain near Prague, and he gained special commendation for his role in it. At the time *The Book of the O’Conor Don* was being written, he was still a captain in command of his company in Flanders, and the final reference I have to him is from June 1632 at which time he was still listed in the English State papers as a captain.³⁶ The fact that he is absent from similar entries made for subsequent years – I have yet failed to find any certain references to him – suggests that he died sometime in 1632 or 1633, or that he left the army.

The age in which Somhairle Mac Domhnaill lived was a turbulent one in Irish, Scottish and English history in general, and in the history of the Clann Domhnaill in particular. Although events such as the Battle of Kinsale and the subsequent treaty of Melifont, the departure of the Earls and Plantation of Ulster can now be seen as marking the end of independent Gaelic Ireland, this was far from clear at the time. While the Greenwich treaty of 1604 established peace between England and Spain, it was a rather uneasy peace, and there was a fear that any further uprising in Ireland might be used by the Spanish as a pretext for invasion.

As has been pointed out elsewhere, Ó Néill’s flight from Ireland was not intended as a permanent departure, but rather as a tactical retreat with the aim of returning to Ireland at the head of an Irish regiment supported by Spain. Aspirations such as these were prominent in correspondence between the Irish faction and the Spanish Court at this time and must

³³ Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid, protocol 4241 ff1113r-1114r (reference from Ciarán O’Sceá). On Aodh Mac an Bhaird see Breatnach, ‘An Irish Bollandus’.

³⁴ Purnell et al., *Downshire manuscripts* VI, 572.

³⁵ There were also in excess of 200 Irish soldiers then serving in Naples. See Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers . . . Venice*, 279.

³⁶ Public Record Office, Kew, State Papers Flanders, 77/21.

have also been prominent in the thoughts of the members of the Irish Regiment, who hoped their exile would prove to be temporary but who were able to fulfill their dreams of returning to fight in Ireland only in the 1640s.

Nor was the possibility of Spanish involvement in Scotland ruled out. Sir Séamas Mac Domhnaill's uprising of 1615 was viewed with keen interest in Europe. Spanish assistance was sought for him, for it was pointed out that he commanded great respect in Ireland as well as in Scotland and that his territories were but three hours' sailing from those of the Earls. Such attempts at establishing a Catholic, Pan-Gaelic confederacy supported by Spain were to no avail.³⁷ The threat therefore of internal dissent in Ireland or in Scotland being used to re-involve Spain loomed large in Stuart England, and such worries were not eased when Archibald Campbell, the Earl of Argyll, converted to Catholicism and joined his former adversary, Sir Séamas Mac Domhnaill, in Flanders in 1618. To allay the threat they posed, both Sir Séamas and Argyll were offered pardons and pensions provided they return to live in London in 1620.³⁸

In all efforts to re-involve Spain in the affairs of Ireland and Scotland, Clann Domhnaill were a pivotal family, and Sir Séamas their leading dissident. His uprising, however short, had brought some hope to the Catholic cause. It is in this context that an anonymous bardic poem exhorting Sir Séamas to come to Ireland's aid (beginning *Bí ad mhosgaladh a mheic Aonghais* ('Awake, o Son of Angus')) is best explained.³⁹ Bergin, who edited the poem, dated it to c. 1600 but pointed out that the idea of a saviour from Islay coming to deliver Ireland was somewhat ridiculous.⁴⁰ However, if we date the poem to c. 1615, a far better background and context can be established for the poem and the sentiments expressed therein.

In all of these events Somhairle Mac Domhnaill was a central figure. He clearly was a man of action and was one who inspired others. The commendation he received from the Emperor for his role in the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 is testimony to his standing and skill

³⁷Kerney Walsh, 'Destruction by peace', 365–6. As we have seen, the Ulster plot of 1615 and Sir Séamas Mac Domhnaill's uprising of that same year in Scotland may have been part of such a wider plan.

³⁸The occasion of Sir Séamas's pardon is celebrated in a poem beginning *Ionmholta an t-óglach nach diognadh* (Walsh, 'Interpretanda', 43–6).

³⁹*IBP* Poem 43. This poem and its contents are discussed in Ó hUiginn, 'Irish literature in Spanish Flanders'.

⁴⁰See also Ó Ceallaigh, *Gleanings*, 104 n. 6.

as a soldier.⁴¹ In like manner, the somewhat cryptic dedication which John O'Neill, his commanding officer of the Irish Regiment, inscribed in f. 152r of the Book of O'Donnell's Daughter, referring to him as 'the best of the Irish', testifies to his standing among his peers.⁴²

Involved centrally in the failed Clann Domhnaill plot of 1615, Somhairle had sailed to join forces with Sir Séamas Mac Domhnaill on hearing that he had rebelled in Scotland. While he fled to Ireland with Sir Séamas after their defeat, he chose not to accompany his leader to the safety of Flanders, preferring instead to remain in Ulster. His actions in seizing ships and in arming himself in early 1616 strongly suggest that he was trying to restart the rebellion in Scotland, probably with the hope of involving Catholic Spain, but the forces stacked against him were overwhelming and he also was forced into exile.

On being arrested, brought before the Governor of Dunkirk, and charged with acts of piracy, Somhairle 'did not deny any thing at all but wished he had don more hurte',⁴³ a response clearly that of a person convinced of the righteousness of his cause, rather than that of one who considered himself a criminal and who hoped to escape punishment. The fact that the Governor was subsequently prevailed upon to release him shows not only the influence the Irish faction was able to exercise within Spanish Flanders, but is further evidence of the respect in which Mac Domhnaill was held by that faction and the importance that attached to him.⁴⁴ Nor indeed was he devoid of a sense of his own status and importance; his refusal in 1617 to accept a Spanish pension, which he felt was beneath a person of his rank, is in itself testimony to this.

While we do not have a full record of his activities and travels in Europe subsequent to his arrival in 1616, it is clear that Somhairle continued his involvement with Sir Séamas Mac Domhnaill and with other veterans of the Scottish uprising of 1615. As various reports confirm, the association and movements of such proclaimed traitors was a source of considerable worry to London, and not without reason. Colonel William Semple, Somhairle Mac Domhnaill's interpreter at the Court in 1617, had long been an advocate for Spanish invasion of England through

⁴¹ See Jennings, 'Some documents', 218.

⁴² On this dedication see Walsh, *Irish men of learning*, 104.

⁴³ Taken from the deposition of John O'Conlon on 1 August 1616 (n. 17 above).

⁴⁴ He was of course related to many of the leaders of the Irish cause in Europe: see Ó hUiginn, '*Duanaire Finn*: patron and text', 86.

Scotland, and was three years later still urging this course of action on Philip III.⁴⁵

The offer of pardon and pension to Sir Séamas and to Argyll in that same year, helped remove part of that threat,⁴⁶ but even still, Argyll was back in Spanish Flanders two years later, and moves were still afoot to re-involve Sir Séamas in the Catholic cause.⁴⁷ His death in London in 1626, and that of Colonel Semple a year earlier, however, dealt a significant blow to the cause of Catholic Scotland.

It was at this time (1626–7) that *Agallamh na Seanórach* and *Duanaire Finn* were transcribed for Somhairle Mac Domhnaill. It has been pointed out that the material found in these texts would have been singularly suitable for Mac Domhnaill, who in a sense might be considered a latter-day member of a *fian* who had lived, like the *fianna* of old, on the margin of settled society as a ‘hero outside the tribe’.⁴⁸ The backward looking orientation of *Agallamh na Seanórach* and the sense of a *temps perdue* may also have resonated with those who had soldiered in the past with the now-departed head of their *fian*, Séamas Mac Domhnaill, and who now found themselves exiled in a distant land.

While these texts may thus have had a certain sentimental value for the person for whom they were compiled, we should perhaps look at the cultural context in which they were written and at their wider significance. The Ireland which existed prior to the early seventeenth century was not a unitary political entity. Independent lordships and individualism were very much the order of the day, and had been since records began. This was an in-built weakness and in the face of a united enemy was fatal.⁴⁹ Belatedly, in the face of growing English power, a realization came that their interests would best be served through joint action rather than following individual paths. It was this understanding that united the Gaelic lords of Ulster, Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill, in their opposition to Elizabethan expansion and encouraged them to find common cause with the Spanish. Interestingly, the Irish word *náisiún*, a late borrowing from Romance, makes its appearance in Irish at this time,⁵⁰ and we witness simultaneously among the Irish a growing consciousness of nation

⁴⁵See Worthington, ‘Scottish exiles’, 56–7, and idem, *Scots in Habsburg service*, 1–49.

⁴⁶Other adherents of Sir Séamas, such as Alasdair Mac Domhnaill of Keppoch, were also pardoned at this time. It is not clear if similar terms were offered to Somhairle Mac Domhnaill, or if he was considered to be as significant a threat as the Scottish leaders.

⁴⁷See Mc Donnell, *Wild Geese of the Antrim MacDonnells*, 29.

⁴⁸On this point see Ó hUiginn, ‘*Duanaire Finn*: patron and text’, 98–9.

⁴⁹On this see Quinn and Nicholls, ‘Ireland in 1534’, 25–7.

⁵⁰*DIL* s.v.

as defined by bonds of faith and fatherland. Having left a late medieval society in which the local had been all important, they were making their way in a modern Europe in which the national was of greater importance and the question of religion loomed large.

The publication of catechismal and other religious works written in the spirit of the Catholic Counter-Reformation was one such manifestation of intellectual engagement with a contemporary European movement, and from the early 1620s moves were afoot to collect and transcribe hagiographical and other materials relating to the history of the Catholic nation that was Ireland. The fruit of such labour was later to be seen in works such as *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae*, or *Triadis Thaumaturgae*, carried out under the direction of John Colgan, *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* compiled by Br Míchéal Ó Cléirigh and his team, or *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* compiled by Keating.⁵¹

A central figure in the earlier stages of this project was Fr Hugh Ward, (Aodh Buidhe Mac an Bhaird), a person with whom Somhairle Mac Domhnaill had associated in Madrid in 1617 and who was appointed guardian of St Anthony's College in Louvain in 1626.⁵² Apart from Ward, Mac Domhnaill already had some connections with the College. Two cousins of his, Daniel and James McDonnell, were friars in St Anthony's at that time, the latter being appointed guardian in 1634.⁵³ A reference to a debt of 150 florins owed by 'Capitaneus Souurely' to the College in 1632 also bespeaks a close connection with the Franciscan community as does the probability that he was buried in St Anthony's.⁵⁴

The compilation of *Agallamh na Seanórach* and *Duanaire Finn* can hardly be divorced from the work in which members of St Anthony's College, under Hugh Ward, were engaged at that time. Indeed, the likely involvement of a Franciscan in transcribing the greater part of the *Agallamh* speaks to the contrary. We should therefore consider the interest such material might have held for the intellectual and military communities in Flanders. Fenian tales commemorate figures and events associated with Ireland's legendary past, and in the *Agallamh* and the associated ballads in *Duanaire Finn* St Patrick plays a prominent role. As such, they can be seen as historical documents which detail some notable chapters

⁵¹On this question see Ó Buachalla, 'Comhthéacs comhaimseartha'.

⁵²See Breatnach, 'An Irish Bollandus'.

⁵³See Mc Donnell, *Wild Geese of the Antrim MacDonnells*, 33–6, and Ohlmeyer, *Civil War and restoration*, 47.

⁵⁴See Jennings, 'Some documents', 219.

in the country's history, legendary though it may be.⁵⁵ They commemorate the exploits and deeds of a noble warrior class, the *Fianna Éireann*, who are forced to endure hardship and danger but who triumph in the end. Not infrequently they encounter foreign invaders who come to take Ireland and the *Fianna* themselves sometimes have to travel abroad to do battle. The similarities between this and the contemporary situation of the exiled *Fianna* of the Irish Regiment would not have gone unnoticed by their intellectual leaders.⁵⁶

It therefore seems unlikely that Somhairle Mac Domhnaill had this material transcribed solely for his personal interest, but rather that he saw it as part of a larger scheme about which he would have been aware through his connection with Ward and with Louvain. His standing among the Irish community in general may have made him a suitable person for organizing the collection and transcription of such works. We do not know why Ó Cathán ceased to transcribe for him, but it may be that manuscript copies of the Fenian ballads that make up *Duanaire Finn* were more readily available among the military community in Ostend than in Louvain, and that in Aodh Ó Dochartaigh Somhairle found an accomplished copyist and compiler who resided in close proximity to him, who had now retired from military service and was in receipt of a monthly income to support him.

The Book of the O'Connor Don, compiled a few years later, can be seen in much the same light, I believe. Its 341 poems have been arranged according to whether they are religious or secular, and the latter are laid out in the book according to the family honoured in the poems. It is a collection of historical documents which list the glories of the Irish, extolling their nobility and their religious devotion. Not only does it contain poems composed in honour of the Gaelic aristocracy, but it also holds compositions honouring Nugents, Fitzgeralds, Fitzmaurices, Plunketts and other Anglo-Norman or Old English families. As such it is quite different from any of the other *duanaireadha* which have come down to us.⁵⁷ The Book of the O'Connor Don represents not such a localised

⁵⁵References to the death of Fionn mac Cumhaill and to battles associated with his *Fianna* can be found in *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann*, s.a. 283, 285.

⁵⁶The role of Fionn as a prophet who foretells a better future for his people would also have been of importance; cf. *Duan. Finn* I, 85, 198–9. Note also that the poem in honour of Sir Séamas Mac Domhnaill alluded to above (n. 39) makes use of a bardic apologue in which Fionn foretells the casting off of the yoke of foreign oppression through the appearance of a saviour of the progeny of the Collas. This person the poet identifies with Sir Séamas. On this see Ó hUiginn 'Irish literature'.

⁵⁷For a discussion of Irish *duanaireadha* see Ó Cuív, *Irish bardic duanaire*.

anthology of poetry devoted to a single patron or family, but a collection in which the leading families of Ireland, regardless of origin, are extolled and venerated. Here, through extensive and judicious use of traditional anthologies, the scribe of this work has transformed material that would have been found in localised *duanaireadha* into the national *duanaire* or verbal art gallery that is the Book of the O'Connor Don. It is a compilation honouring faith and fatherland, as do the Annals of the Four Masters, the *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae* and other works born of the same intellectual and scholarly movements.

The absence from BOCD of poems honouring the Clann Domhnaill is significant. There are many such poems in existence and more may have been available at the time BOCD was compiled. The total absence of such material from the volume can hardly be fortuitous, and has been attributed to the possibility that such poems were set aside by Aodh Ó Dochartaigh to be put in a separate Clann Domhnaill anthology.⁵⁸ We have no record of such a compilation or what other material it might have contained, but it is somewhat ironic that failure to include Clann Domhnaill poems in BOCD resulted in the omission from this national roll of honour of the patron's family, one of the most significant families in the Gaelic world.

⁵⁸On this see Mc Donnell, *Wild Geese of the Antrim MacDonnells*, 31, and Ó hUiginn 'Duanairé Finn: patron and text', 104–6. On the availability of some Clann Domhnaill poetry to Aodh Ó Dochartaigh, see Caoimhín Breatnach's contribution to this volume.